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Beatle at the beginning

FIRED FROM A PLACE IN ROCK HISTORY, PETE BEST TELLS HIS SIDE OF THE TALE AND PLAYS IN HIS OWN

TOURING BAND

**By Steve Marinucci
Mercury News**

The Beatles that Americans saw on their TV screens Feb. 9, 1964, looked a lot different from the group Pete Best knew.

In earlier days, they fancied leather outfits, not the tailored, collarless suits they wore on that first appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

Then, there was the group itself. Two members were missing from the band Best knew. One was Stu Sutcliffe, the band's bassist before Paul McCartney. Sutcliffe died of a brain hemorrhage in April 1962.

The other was Best himself. He'd been the Beatles' drummer since 1960 and had played on the well-known "My Bonnie" session in Hamburg. But in August 1962, he was kicked out of the band and left to watch the Beatles' rise to fame from the sidelines.

Today, Best, 61, is touring the United States with his own group, the Pete Best Band, which includes his brother, Roeg. The band plays Campbell's King's Head Tavern on Wednesday.

Besides his brother, who plays drums in the band with Best, the band also includes lead guitarists Phil Melia and Mark Hay, bass player Dave Deevey and singer Chris Cavanagh. (The Campbell show will also include a pre-show question-and-answer session with Best and an autograph session afterward.)

Best calls the pre-fame Beatles "more powerhouse, more charismatic." And though it may seem strange today to see the Beatles in leather jackets, he says they fit the group's Hamburg lifestyle, when they played six- and seven-hour sets six to seven nights a week.

"We found that the stage jackets basically just disintegrated along with the rest of the stage clothes. Leather was . . . something we could utilize onstage and live in it offstage as well. It served a dual purpose," he says.

Best sang a few songs during his days as drummer, among them "Matchbox" (also sung on the BBC radio program by John Lennon and on record by Ringo Starr) and "Peppermint Twist."

"That was about it. That's all they could persuade me to sing at that time."

There are rumors of rare live recordings and possibly video of the Beatles circulating among collectors with him on them. Best says he doesn't know for sure, but says, "We're not always aware of what people have recorded."

Of all the Beatles, Best says he was closest to Lennon. "John was very much what the people saw, the acidic human person," he says. But he was "a very tender and a very loving person as well."

McCartney was "very much at the early stage a public relations man, and I think he still is, you know," he says.

And George Harrison? "George was very much into his music. He spent most of his time trying to improve his guitar technique."

He describes Sutcliffe as ``very much, again, a quiet guy. Smallest in the band stature-wise, but we all knew deep down he was very much into art, even though he loved the Beatles 200 percent then."

Film is a love story

Best calls the 1993 movie ``Backbeat," which revolved around the group's early days, ``a good movie," though he says it was more ``the wonderful love story of Astrid Kirchherr and Stu Sutcliffe, and we were there while this was just going on."

On Jan. 1, 1962, John, Paul, George and Pete were booked into a Decca Records studio for an audition. (Decca wouldn't sign them to a contract.) Five of the tracks were later released on the Beatles' ``Anthology 1" CD.

Best recalls, ``I remember that we'd celebrated the night before, because it was New Year's Eve. And we got to the recording session late, which Brian" -- manager Brian Epstein -- ``wasn't too happy about. . . . We were fortunate because Mike Smith, who was going to be the A&R man, he'd been celebrating as well, so he landed up late."

When asked about the day he was sacked from the Beatles, Best is hesitant, but then recalls.

``I was called into Brian Epstein's office. We'd played the Cavern the night before. . . . After talking around the subject for a while, he turned around to me and said, `Pete, I don't really know how to turn 'round and tell you this. You're out of the band on Saturday.' That's as fast as it happened. There was no forewarning. It was done. The boys weren't there, so I couldn't discuss it and find out what their views were. But that was it. One day I was a Beatle and next day I was out."

Very murky' decision

Best says he has never learned the person really responsible for his firing. ``Over the years . . . I tried to find out. It's still very gray and very murky."

In 1964, U.S. TV audiences saw Best on the prime-time game show ``I've Got a Secret," hosted by Garry Moore. Best's secret, of course, was that he'd been a Beatle.

In addition to the current tour, Best is also co-author (with brothers Roeg and Rory) of the recently published ``The Beatles: The True Beginnings," a coffee-table book filled with rare photos celebrating the Casbah Club, a Liverpool coffee club opened by his late mother, Mona, in 1959. McCartney contributes an introductory quote about the club to the book.

Though Americans know the Cavern as the birthplace of the Beatles, Best says that title should go to the Casbah.

``It was the catalyst for the Mersey Beat sound long before the Cavern," Best says. ``The Casbah was the birthplace of the Beatles, the birthplace for many of the bands in Liverpool."

Best has plans for more books -- a prequel detailing more of his mother's early story and another with his more recent history. The first, he hopes, will be published late in 2004. The family also plans to re-open the long-closed Casbah Club in early 2004, complete with the name ``John" scratched in the wall by Lennon, as pictured in the book.

Though Best says he and McCartney haven't met up again since those early days, he'd be glad to get together with his former bandmate.

``And as far as I'm concerned, the door's always been open. But I hope that one of these days we will meet up. It'd be nice to meet up again after all this time."

Pete Best Band

Where: King's Head Pub, 201 Orchard City Drive, Campbell

When: 6:30 and 9 p.m. Wednesday

Tickets: \$20; (408) 871-2499 or through Streetlight Records in San Jose
at (888) 330-7776.

Also: 8 p.m. Thursday, McNear's Mystic Theatre, 23 Petaluma Blvd. North, Petaluma, \$20, (800) 225-2277,
www.tickets.com, mystictheatre.com

8 p.m. Saturday, Avalon Ballroom, 1290 Sutter St., San Francisco, \$18.50, www.ticketmaster.com

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